

State Lunatic Asylum (Buffalo State Hospital)
400 Forest Avenue
Northwest corner of Forest
and Elmwood Avenues
Buffalo
Erie County
New York

HABS No. NY-5606

HABS
NY,
15-BUF
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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

STATE LUNATIC ASYLUM
(BUFFALO STATE HOSPITAL)HABS
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Location: 400 Forest Avenue, northwest corner of Forest and Elmwood Avenues, Buffalo, Erie County, New York

Present Owner: State of New York, Department of Mental Hygiene

Present Occupant: Hospital of the State of New York

Present Use: Hospital for the mentally ill

Statement of Significance: The Buffalo State Hospital is a monumental structure which was designed for strictly utilitarian or institutional purposes. The exterior presentation of the Administration Building has strength of massing and aesthetic scaling to material. The wards, although themselves not innovative in design, were part of an over-all design which was well-conceived and well-landscaped.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The building was designed in the summer of 1870, following a very informal competition. The final design was probably settled in 1871. Excavation began in June, 1871. The cornerstone was laid on September 18, 1872. By 1880, the Administration Building, Male Wards A, B, C, D, and E, and all service buildings were completed. Female Wards were completed between 1890 and 1900.
2. Architect: Henry Hobson Richardson and Charles Cambrill, firm.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The 203-acre site was given to the State of New York by the City of Buffalo in April, 1870. The site was approved by legislative action on April 27, 1870.
4. Builder or contractor, suppliers: A. J. Warner of Rochester was Supervising Architect. The Engineer-in-charge was Marsden Davey. Gov. John A. Dix (1872-74) appointed John Churchyard as Management Superintendent of Construction. He was followed by Samuel H. Fields (1875-76), John Walls (1876-78), Peter Emslie

(1878-88), etc. All builders were from western New York. Construction continued from 1871 to 1890. For most of these years no construction was reported as having taken place during the winter months. The total cost of the buildings up to January, 1880, was \$1,285,785.56.

5. Original plans: Sixty-two sheets of original drawings are contained in the collection of the Houghton Library, Harvard University.
6. Alterations and additions: The original plan as adopted by the State of New York in 1871, was completed by 1900. Any additions to the building are recorded in the Annual Reports published by the Board of Managers of the Buffalo State Asylum for the New York State Legislature. Any alterations will also be listed in the above source.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

The general plan was determined by Dr. Joseph P. Gray, head of the existing State Lunatic Asylum in Utica, N. Y. According to tradition, the plan was based on the scheme of similar French institutions. It also followed closely the plan of older buildings of the Connecticut State Hospital in Middletown, designed by Sloan and Hutton and begun in 1867. State legislation of May 23, 1869, enabled Gov. John T. Hoffman to appoint five commissioners to select a site for a state asylum for the Department of Mental Hygiene in the Eighth Judicial District, Western New York. To secure the site location, the City of Buffalo, in April 1870, offered to donate 203 acres of land valued at \$60,000, and a perpetual supply of water. After April 27, 1870--the date on which the State approved the site--the governor appointed a board of ten managers. The first officers, serving several years or more, were James R. White, M. D., President; William F. Rogers, Secretary; Henry Martin, Treasurer. Standing committees--executive, auditing, and grounds--were also appointed. After a board meeting on August 25, 1870, a map of a ground plan of the project was presented and adopted. On March 3, 1871, the board accepted the designs of Richardson and Gambrill. On May 15, 1871, the survey of grounds was laid out and improved from plans of Olmsted and Vaux and Company, landscape architects. The main building was formally opened November 15, 1881. Before 1900, Male Wards A and B were occupied by female patients. The original name of the hospital was the State Lunatic Asylum. By 1870, Richardson was already associated with William Dorsheimer, the District Attorney for the District of Northern New York. Richardson and Gambrill had completed the design of a Buffalo house for Dorsheimer, 1868-69. Research on the Dorsheimer House (HABS

No. NY-5608) suggests that Dorsheimer's acquaintance with Olmsted in 1868--when a committee of which Dorsheimer was a member hired Olmsted to design a public park system for the city of Buffalo--was a significant factor in Richardson's receiving commissions not only for the Dorsheimer House, but also for the State Hospital in Buffalo and the New York State Capitol in Albany.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: The Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society has a minimum of six photographs in the Iconographic Collection. Proceedings in Connection with the Ceremony of Laying the Cornerstone, a pamphlet printed for the September 18, 1872, event, contains a lithograph of a drawing of the structure as completed. This print was made by White and Brayley, Printers and Lithographers, Buffalo.

2. Bibliography:

- a. Primary and unpublished sources: None known.

- b. Secondary and published sources:

Board of Managers of the Buffalo State Asylum.
Annual Reports. 1870-1900.

Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society. Minimum of fifteen references to newspaper articles.

Buffalo Morning Express. October 8, 1874.

Fabos, Julius Gy.; Milde, Gordon T.; and Weinmayr, V. Michael. Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., Founder of Landscape Architecture in America. Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1968.

Hitchcock, Henry-Russell. The Architecture of H. H. Richardson and His Times. Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1966.

Van Rensselaer, Marianna Griswold. Henry Hobson Richardson and His Works. Facsimile Edition. Park Forest, Ill.: The Prairie School Press, 1967.

- c. Likely sources not yet investigated:

Frederick Law Olmsted Papers, Library of Congress.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The rather irregularly massed roof elements and building openings produce a strong, picturesque facade which easily adapts to a heavily landscaped site.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: A main central pavilion (160' x 170') is flanked by receding wards. The whole complex is V-shaped in plan. The wards have irregular H- or T-shaped plans. The distance between the outer pavilions is 780 feet.
2. Foundations: Local flintstone is set in English cement mortar.
3. Wall construction: The reddish-brown Medina sandstone used in the Administration Building, the center pavilion, the four flanking pavilions, and Male and Female Wards A and B, was quarried in Hulberton, Orleans County, New York. Due to estimated construction costs of \$3,000,000 in 1872 for the three outer pavilions on the east, it was decided to substitute common brick for stone. The construction of the western pavilions by 1878, repeated this scheme.
4. Structural system: Interior and exterior load bearing walls are combined with iron beams and lintels, and wooden joists and rafters.
5. Chimneys: The Administration Building had two chimneys to service interior fireplaces. These have been removed. The main chimney, 110 feet high, is located in the center court of the Mechanical Building.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways: The Administration has three arched entrance doorways with three recessed, wood paneled doors.
 - b. Windows: All windows have wooden frames and sashes with fixed transoms above. All windows are screened with a diamond-patterned wire grill. The third-story windows in the Administration Building have segmental arched headers. All others in all pavilions

have square headers. The window arrangements in all buildings are treated more in the manner of domestic architecture than institutional architecture.

7. Roofs: All buildings have a combination of gabled and hip-ped roofs covered with asphalt shingles. All roofs have some gabled dormers. The Administration Building has a large central dormer to the south which is flanked by two smaller dormers. Two similar towers with round corner turrets have steeply pitched hipped roofs covered with copper sheeting. The curved connecting corridors between pavilions have barrel-vaulted roofs covered with ribbed copper sheeting.
8. Porches: The Administration Building has a flight of steps projecting to the sidewalk from the three arched entrance loggia. All buildings have one, two, or three-story, fully screened porches with iron columns, concrete floors, iron railings and enclosures.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: The 3- $\frac{1}{2}$ -story Administration Building, on raised basement, contains offices, reception rooms, dining room, and other service areas. All ward buildings have similar H-shaped or T-shaped plans with two dormitories, two parlors, two nurses' rooms, two baths, two washrooms, and two clothes rooms. In both the male and female wards, Wards A and B are three-story structures; Wards C and D are two-story structures; and the Wards E are one-story structures. Tramways are located in the basements.
2. Stairways: The main stairway in the Administration Building has a wooden staircase with heavy Eastlake-derived ornament. Other enclosed stairways in the wards have ornamental iron elements. There are completely screened fire escapes at the north end of the center wing of each ward.
3. Flooring: All flooring is maple, now covered with resilient tile in most areas.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: All walls and ceilings are painted plaster.
5. Doorways and doors: The Administration Building has molded walnut doorways and paneled walnut and oak doors. A large arched and molded composition with windows and door serves as the enclosure for the reception office. All other doorways and doors are of maple.

6. Special decorative features: It appears that any special decorative features in the Administration Building other than the stairway have been removed. Some office furniture was made for the structure at the time of construction.
7. Hardware: All hardware in the center pavilion is brass and wrought iron.
8. Lighting: The gas lighting was changed to electric lighting in 1888. All fixtures are modern.
9. Heating: The central heating plant is located in the Mechanical Building.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The Administration Building faces south, overlooking a wooded park area.
2. Historic landscape design: The original landscaping and plantings were planned by Olmsted and Vaux in 1876. Olmsted assisted Richardson in siting the complex in 1871. The original property of 203 acres was farm land. The original farm buildings were located in the northwest corner of the property. The Scajaquada Creek runs through the northeast corner of the property. Since the original planning for the State Hospital, the State College of New York at Buffalo has been built to the north and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery to the east.
3. Outbuildings: The Mechanical Building is located 200 feet to the north of the Administration Building. This building contains the heating plant, engineer's station, laundry, shops, etc. The kitchen wings--three-story structures--are attached by curving corridors to the north sides of Wards B. Two greenhouses are located about 100 feet to the interior of the open V-shaped plan from Wards E. An engineer's house and women's house are sited to the north and west of the Mechanical Building.
4. Walks: Cement and gravel walks wind about the complex. A curving drive approaches from Elmwood Avenue.

Prepared by Louis Greenstein, Member
AIA Preservation Committee
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PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This photo-data book was prepared as part of a 1964-65 recording project in cooperation with the Buffalo-Western New York Chapter of AIA, Olaf William Shelgren (at that time Chairman of the Chapter's Preservation Committee), and Olaf William Shelgren, Jr.--both, of the firm Shelgren, Patterson and Marzec. Photographs were taken in May 1965 by Jack E. Boucher, HABS staff photographer. Under the direction of John C. Poppeliers, Chief, HABS, an editorial project was undertaken in September 1973 by Susan R. Slade, architectural historian.